

Immigration Conundrum

A sermon preached by Rev. Christine Robinson
on Sunday, June 27, 2010

When Arizona passed a clearly unconstitutional law mandating police to check immigration status of anyone they are doing business with who seems—that's a pretty slippery word, *seems*—likely to be an undocumented alien, I thought it was time that I learned more about this difficult subject. And the best way to make sure I do that is to schedule myself to write a sermon on the topic, and that's what I did.

Whew, boy! It turns out that immigration is not a "topic." It's a life study. And it is a life study in a field in which, it seems, nobody is neutral and most people are so passionate that they are sloppy with truth. It's a topic that requires thinkers to project into the future and pretend that they are sure of themselves. It's a topic that reaches deeply into people's inner world, into their need to be comfortable in society, secure in their job, feeling that life is reasonably fair. It's a subject that trades in soul-deep fears about change and fear of Other. It's a subject that calls Americans back to the American Dream and asks us how far we should extend the American Experiment. George H. Bush tried at the top of his power to get immigration reform and failed. President Obama was going to tackle it, but the recession got in the way and he wisely decided to postpone. But his hand is being forced.

Unfortunately democracy, especially polarized democracy, does not lend itself to decisions in which the numbers, facts, and assumptions are soft, and everybody's ox is going to be gored. Immigration reform is a lot like climate change; it's going to tax our powers of understanding and cooperation to the max. And just as the folks who are worried about climate change have latched onto "climate chaos" to describe what's going on right now, so I'm going to call the current immigration situation in the U.S. "immigration chaos."

Vocabulary is important. What we have now is chaos. Calling it that will help us change it. And while we are on vocabulary, let's name the major players in immigration chaos correctly. It's morally abhorrent to call people "illegals." That's similar to calling people suffering from leukemia "cancers" It is dehumanizing, and using dehumanizing vocabulary diminishes its victims, which is immoral, and allows the name callers to proceed as if human beings were not involved, which perpetuates immorality. A person is a person. Their status may be undocumented and they may have broken the law, but they are people.

How do you eat an elephant? One step at a time. After a couple of weeks of diving into the literature and getting more and more confused, I realized that part of my confusion was that this subject has three major aspects, and most discussions conflate them. While the three aspects have to be dealt with at the same time, they have to be separated in order to be solved. The three aspects are:

- Do we want any immigration to be legal, and what purposes would that serve?
- Do we want to prevent illegal immigration, and if so, what is the best way to do that?
- What do we do about the estimated 12 million undocumented residents of our nation?

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My perspective is the perspective of a minister, a person especially commissioned by you, and by extension, society, to think about the meaning of things and the spiritual, or depth, aspects of subjects. I'm no expert on immigration, only an expert on values. But here we go.

So bite number one. Why have legal immigration and what are its costs?

First of all, a nation needs immigration when there is a lot of land or the land has been depopulated. That was the case in the U.S. up until recently. While we should always remember that there were people here before America from whom the land was clearly stolen, that's another topic. The need for people to populate the land and own it and develop it according to Western values drove a very open immigration policy. Immigration has made this nation what it is today. You can make a strong case that this nation is no longer in need of more people to develop it and keep it safe.

You also need the people to do work the native population won't or can't do for wages that produce goods that people will pay for. You need immigration when a nation is not producing enough entry-level workers because of population trends. You need immigration when the native population disdains or is not fit for important work such as farm work or high tech work. Now a part of this imbalance is caused by the fact that that we don't want to pay enough for some kinds of work. There's an ugly word for taking advantage of someone's weak status to make money at his expense; the word is *exploitation*, which is morally dicey unless you are giving something in return. In our current system, the return for picking lettuce for piece rates until you back breaks is that your kids get a free education and the hope that they won't have to sweat in the sun. But if that's the scene, you will *always* need immigrant workers from destitute nations because the economy will never tolerate good enough wages, working conditions, and benefits to attract natives to the work. This can't go on forever. We either have to begin to change the economics of food production and yard work and construction to be stable or we have to exploit what are called "guest workers," a horrible misnomer because, contrary to how you treat your guests, these people are only invited when you need them and are thrown out when you don't and have no incentive other than destitution and no love for the nation of their work; it's a morally repugnant scheme, actually.

A third reason to have immigration is that a nation understands itself as a nation of immigrants, full of people who have a sense of gratitude that their own immigrant ancestors, or parents, or they, themselves, came to this nation and want others to have the chance. All by itself, "America for Americans" is morally suspect and spiritually bankrupt, a version of "now that I have something, nobody else can have it." There are good reasons to limit immigration. But we can never forget who we are, and we should probably always have some immigration just because that's who we are.

Finally, you allow immigration on humanitarian grounds. You want to rescue people who have been persecuted or have lost their homes. This is currently a small portion of immigration, but global warming and sea rise is about to make it big. We might as well be prepared.

And why is immigration periodically resisted, often fervently, in a country? Some reasons are racism, xenophobia, selfishness, or other pathologies, but there are good and rational reasons that people worry about uncontrolled immigration.

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They want a stable population. Runaway population growth is a problem for the ecology and for human service. Too much protesting along these lines starts sounding like selfishness, but some is warranted.

People resist uncontrolled immigration because they believe that national strength is a product of national cohesion and thus depends on a shared culture and language. They are not wrong about this. There is an American Way, for better or for worse. As someone who has worked for three years with a person who loved the Canada way and not the American way, I can tell you how pervasive the American way seems to non-Americans! Overall, I like it, and I want to keep it.

People resist immigration because it undermines the wages of the least-skilled and trained native workers. If my kid had dropped out of high school, I would really care about this. Immigration is an overall boon for the economy, but there is no question about it; it depresses the lowest wages of the native born workers.

Given these reasons for and against immigration, what might we say about crafting a sensible immigration policy? Here are my thoughts, offered to you after a week of study:

1. The new law needs to slow the pace of immigration to let our self-image as a proud and diverse nation of immigrants reassert itself over the fears and stresses of such a fast pace of change. To ignore the popular feeling is to make a space for demagoguery and law breaking. That's what we are seeing now. It's not worth it.
2. Since we want to and need to control our population, we should limit the number of family members an immigrant can bring with them to this country to legal partners and minor children. Everybody else is on their own.
3. The politicians should hammer out the philosophy of what kinds of industry need the support of immigrant workers and leave the actual number each year to be worked out administratively. Currently congress members, with no more knowledge than you or I have of this complex topic, set these numbers at rational levels, which politicians can't afford to do in the current climate. Because they are woefully insufficient, there is a market for illegal workers. And one major goal of immigration reform should be to end illegal immigration.

And that brings us to bite number two, illegal immigration, so swallow hard, and here we go.

You might think it goes without saying that we want to end illegal immigration. But, sorry to say, there are huge and powerful interests that like things just the way they are. They are employers of illegal workers. The employment of illegal workers is extremely lucrative. These workers will work for under-market wages, and they don't complain about ill treatment; they know there is no way to get the law to enforce workplace health and safety rules. The employment of illegal workers gives an employer a huge advantage over lawful competitors. I would point out that the consumer partially benefits from these unfair and often immoral employment practices. Ponder that as you enjoy your tomato sandwich this afternoon. I know you don't choose to be exploitive of other human beings. But until the tomatoes in your own garden ripen, you probably are. Another way you benefit from illegal immigration is that many of them and their

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employers pay employment taxes using false social security numbers. That amounts to so much money that will never be paid out in benefits that it is a line item in the Social Security budget. Illegal immigration is one of the reasons Social Security is still solvent.

Because there are lots of benefits to illegal immigration, it has been allowed to flourish, but there is currently a strong rebellion about this. Most proposals to stop it involve a "secure border." We New Mexicans are not easily fooled by this, but many Americans believe that this is an attainable goal. So let's talk about borders. There are three reasons to secure your border.

The first is so people can't flood your markets with undesirable or untaxed goods. Our current border security was built up to solve this problem, a problem of inspecting truck roads leading to American markets. Even this goal is difficult when the undesirable goods in question are drugs and people can fly airplanes.

A second reason is to keep people out of your nation who mean you harm, of many kinds: spies, terrorists, escaping criminals, drug runners. How much of that you can realistically do is a question I can't answer, but it is clear that at least the terrorists and spies favor Eastern airports to Southwestern deserts as their entry of choice.

The final reason to secure borders is to prevent undocumented workers from messing with your economy and allowing themselves to be exploited. But you don't need an expensive and indefensible fence to accomplish this goal. You only need two things. They are very simple, but powerful forces oppose them.

First you need a right-to-work card that lives in the twenty-first century and whose security system is more sophisticated than blue curlicues. It is issued to everyone, citizen and immigrant, who does have a right to work in this nation. (It goes to everybody because it is not the case that "you know 'em when you see 'em," and this is America and we believe in equality under the law.)

And secondly, you enforce the law that already exists which requires employers to assure themselves that their employees have a right to work and, now that you have made it possible for them to determine this, add mandatory penalties on the employer. If the person responsible for hiring paid a hefty fine and spent thirty days in jail every time they were caught with an undocumented worker, and after, say, two slips, the CEO of the company went to jail for thirty days too, illegal workers would find it very hard to get jobs.

If immigration officials quit patrolling the deserts of the Southwest and began the more congenial work of random checks on employers, nobody would come to this country illegally looking for work anymore. Take down the sign on the fence that says "Help Wanted, Apply Within," and you don't even need the fence.

This simple solution is not possible at the moment because American citizens are scared of anything that resembles a national identity card. Liberals and conservatives alike. But the only way I know of for a huge, diverse, rich nation that cares about civil rights to solve the illegal immigration problem is to make it impossible for illegal immigrants to work. And in a nation where you can't "tell them by looking at them," that has to involve a right-to-work card that lives in the twenty-first century and doesn't rely on blue curlicues for security. There will have to be a lot of work done to help both liberals and conservatives feel safe about the introduction of such a card. It's time for that work to begin.

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Bite number three: what to do about current, law abiding, undocumented residents and their citizen children.

OK, so now we have solved the two easy parts of the problem. We've rationalized legal immigration so that it serves the goals of our nation while protecting our culture. And we have all but eliminated illegal immigration by making it impossible for an illegal immigrant to get a job. Now to the really hard part. What to do about the twelve to thirteen, maybe more, million people who are here illegally. This is no small problem, and it is all our fault, caused by the fact that we haven't solved problems one and two.

Twelve to thirteen million people is the combined population of New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. Imagine all of us gone! Nothing left but cows and chili plants withering in the sun. Last year the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) deported a record three hundred thousand undocumented aliens from this country. At that rate, we're talking thirty-five years and as much money as currently goes into the entire Health and Human Service's annual budget. And such a move would have a dire effect on the economy, and would leave employers without workers and children without parents.

Which reminds me; it is time to amend the constitution to end the birthright provision. In most of the nations of the world, you are only a citizen of that nation if at least one parent was a citizen. We should do the same. It's not good for children to be citizens of a nation their parents don't have the right to be in. And it significantly limits a nation's ability to control immigration.

Polls show that most Americans believe that undocumented workers who have obeyed the law and been employed for many years should be allowed to become citizens of this nation. There is a vocal minority that just wants undocumented workers to go away. It is an ignorant minority but an insistent one. There will have to be a careful political calculus created to accomplish this, and it will take a long time. Time to start.

Next Sunday is the Fourth of July, a day we celebrate in gratitude for this, the land of the free. Last year, on the Fourth of July, six thousand people took the oath of American citizenship, including one thousand in Disneyworld, and 237 in Iraq—soldiers born in more than fifty nations serving in our military who were encouraged to apply for citizenship. That makes me proud. That brings tears to my eyes. That's who our nation most deeply is. This is a nation which took the humble and the poor and the yearning to breathe free, who were actually the enterprising and energetic, the hopeful and the entrepreneuring of the world's poor, and welcomed them to its lamp-lit shores. We still do, and if we are wise and careful, we always will. It's just who we are. Let's end the chaos and enjoy, once again, being who we most deeply are.